

U.S. Is Artfully Silent on Oil Threats to Lithuania

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN
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WASHINGTON, April 18 — The Bush Administration, which has been trying to avoid becoming embroiled in the struggle between Lithuania and Moscow, said late today that until it could confirm reports that the Kremlin had cut off Soviet oil to Lithuania it would not have any response.

"We are looking into the details of this," said the White House spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater. "We don't have any independent information. We want to see if it's real, and what the extent of the situation is. I wouldn't expect anything tonight."

The reports of the oil cutoff came a few hours after Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d told a Congressional committee that the United States would consider severing certain "commercial" arrangements with the Soviet Union if President Mikhail S. Gorbachev continued tightening a vise around Lithuania.

Why U.S. Needs Good Relations

But Mr. Baker coupled his warning with a longer statement about why it was in the strategic interests of the United States to maintain the various aspects of the good relationship with Moscow, as well as to further the general process of democratic change initiated by Mr. Gorbachev.

This second point, officials said, reflects the real mood of the Bush Administration. Both the President and the Secretary of State, they said, want to do everything they can to avoid punishing Moscow for its conduct in Lithuania because they fear this could force the United States into a situation in which it would have to respond to every tactic in what will probably be a long, hard struggle between the Baltic republics and the Kremlin.

This would wreak havoc on all other aspects of United States-Soviet relations, officials said.

In his testimony today before the House Ways and Means Committee, Mr. Baker appeared to be trying to build public support for a measured response to events in Lithuania.

Maintaining the Right Balance

While making clear that the independence of the three million Lithuanians remains an American objective, Mr. Baker also pointed out that encouraging Mr. Gorbachev to democratize the Soviet Union as a whole and to reach sweeping arms agreements with the West are also major American interests. He seemed to suggest that a proper balance between them must be kept in mind in any reaction to events in the Baltic region.

Mr. Baker's appeal won surprisingly strong backing from the committee's Democrats, who also said that the Administration must not allow concerns about Lithuania's independence drive to overshadow all other aspects of Soviet-American relations.

"We support the aspirations of the Lithuanian people for self-determina-



The New York Times/Paul Hasefros

Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d told the House Ways and Means Committee yesterday that the United States would consider ending certain "commercial" arrangements with the Soviet Union if President Mikhail S. Gorbachev continued threatening actions against Lithuania. Portraits on the wall are of former chairmen of the committee.

tion, and we have never recognized the forcible incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia," Mr. Baker said. "It is time now, as we've been saying for several weeks, to engage in a dialogue. The Lithuanians want such a dialogue. That, it seems to us, is the answer to the problem — dialogue, not economic boycotts and not threats to invoke presidential rule."

But he added that the Administration's overall policy toward the Soviet Union has to be based on "what's in the interest of the United States of America."

"It is in our interest," he continued,

"to see the countries of Eastern Europe free of Soviet forces and secure from threats that could reverse their revolutions. It is in our interest to see the Soviets destroy 40,000 tanks through a conventional forces agreement. It is in our interest to lock in major reductions in Soviet strategic forces and to create a more stable, predictable and secure relationship that reduces the risk of nuclear war."

"It is in our interest to settle regional conflicts in a way that fosters peace, freedom, and democracy, as we did in Central America. And it is in our interest to see the reform process go for-

ward in the Soviet Union so that it will be more committed to internal progress than it is to external expansion."

Reacting to Mr. Baker's comments, Representative Thomas J. Downey, Democrat of Long Island, said: "I think it's exactly correct. And I would tell you to resist those in this country, and I'm afraid probably still in the Congress, who look at Mikhail Gorbachev and see a Joseph Stalin dressed in sheep's clothing and would love an excuse to jump-start the cold war. I don't want to see that happen."

Nevertheless, Mr. Baker also made it clear that a further crackdown by the Kremlin on Lithuania would inevitably affect the United States-Soviet relationship, but the only area that he specifically identified was commercial relations. Mr. Baker seemed to be indicating that the Administration would be prepared to punish Moscow for actions it considered inappropriate in Lithuania, but it will, for now, confine its actions to those areas of the relationship that benefit the Soviet Union more than the United States.

"Some of our bilateral commercial contacts with the Soviet Union may be more directly in their interest than in ours," Mr. Baker said. "And those contacts are being put to risk by Soviet actions in Lithuania. Our willingness and ability to take such steps that benefit perestroika in the near term is, to be sure, affected by Soviet behavior."

More Concepts Articulated

He declined to specify which commercial ties might be affected. But he did say in his testimony, just before talking about Lithuania, that since the Malta summit meeting in December, "we have begun a program of extensive technical cooperation with the Soviets designed to facilitate the massive task of restructuring their economy."

In addition, he said, "At Malta, the President also presented a series of bilateral commercial initiatives designed to demonstrate our support for perestroika, serve our economic interests, and in the process, help teach the Soviets about the practical workings of market economics."

Since Malta, the United States and the Soviet Union have been negotiating a new trade agreement that could open American markets to Soviet exports once the Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions imposed on Moscow are lifted. That will take place as soon as the Supreme Soviet passes a law codifying a new, more liberal emigration policy. Some hard-liners in Congress have suggested suspending those trade talks in response to any harsh Soviet actions in Lithuania.

Administration officials said President Bush had received a letter from the Lithuanian leader, Vytautas Landsbergis, earlier today, but they declined to comment on the contents. The letter, the officials said, was dated March 19 and was not a reaction to the latest events. It took a month to reach the President.